Date Created: Jun 27, 2022

Digital Moral Outrage and Modern Activism: What Changed and What Should Change?

By Hongkang Xu

Imagine this scene: An angry mob of citizen protesters gather outside of some federal building. Seeing prepared police officers awaiting in full suit with no intent of backing down, the crowd suddenly becomes inflamed. Push comes to shove and activists start to bang on the glass doors at the main entrance. The doors shake violently, and their squeaking adds a terrifying higher note to the miles of enraged voices outside.

Torches, pitchforks, anarchy, this is what comes to mind when government officials and regular employees think of the word “moral outrage”. If widespread moral outrage occurs, there must be some seriously unresolved underlying social conflict. They believe that when protests like the ones above occur offline, with the aggressive banging at the doors, it’s already the eleventh hour for social reform, for things to return to peace.

However, digital moral outrage and online activism are treated very differently. Current policymakers don’t find digital outrage as influential and as bone chilling as the nightmares illustrated above. And thus, they’ve missed a critical period in modern activism to address key issues and enact policy changes.

With online activism being an increasingly popular and mature channel for collective action, governments need to respond and answer moral outrage appeals punctually. Recent protests around the world such as abortion rights in the US, political reform in Ethiopia, cattle trade ban in Australia and migrant worker rights in India, all started in the form of moral outrage and collective action online. This points to one crucial message: Is it time for governments to take digital outrage and online activism seriously?

Moral outrage is not quite “Torches, Pitchforks and Anarchy”. In fact, its origins stem from Relative Deprivation Theory, that outlines its nature as a strong negative emotional response that occurs as a response to perceived injustice and inequality in the treatment of third parties (Martin et al., 1984). It is not to be confused with collective guilt, a similar emotional response, which later findings suggest is key to promoting reparative actions. Moral outrage is responsible for stimulating retributive actions, which as you can see, the government knows all too well about.

When it comes to digital outrage and its effects on online activism, recent literature analyzing real world protests suggest three distinct and significant characterizations: First, Relative Deprivation Theory still applies on Social Media, tracing digital outrage as a response to injustice; Second, social media amplifies the studied effects, but inconsistent relations between online and offline activism cause increased unpredictability; Lastly, Group-Based Anger Pathways are found to be more sophisticated and intertwined with Group-Efficacy Pathways on Social Media (Xu, 2022).

These conclusions demand further research in terms of deeper and clearer causation effects, but policy makers can start with addressing the many concerns within this process.

The first goal is de-radicalization. Workneh et al (2021) reported four main negative outcomes of digital outrage from studies into political reform in Ethiopia. These included the incitement of violence, hate speech, political polarization, and misinformation. Previous theorization let by Crockett (2019) pointed out that anonymity of social network systems online emboldens hate actors to spread disinformation and violence incitement posts. The effects of echo chambers, where similar shared realities are echoed and socially validated, also contribute to misinformation, polarization and extremism.

Given significant pushback on censorship from the general public, as well as the high cost of maintenance of censorship policies, policies can take on more moderate approaches. These may include the placement of anti-hate ads as well as monitoring and punctually addressing emerging sizable hate speech influence on social media.

Governments should also try to involve all demographics in online conversation. The current debate on digital moral outrage establishes that moral outrage has a powerful mobilization effect, but also may demotivate minority demographics from sharing their opinions under social pressure, in an effect called the spiral of silence. This dissuades online activism from reflecting the needs and wants of the general public and perpetuates polarization.

Policy makers may increase internet participation by improving internet facilities and infrastructure. The digital divide effect states that some groups of people are more technologically savvy than others, and thus have a disproportional stake in online opinion. Social Network algorithms may be designed in a way that feeds minority demographic tweets to inhibit this effect, or proactively avoids repeating mainstream opinion.

As we can see, social media provides policy makers with a window into answering public demands. Although changes need to be made to inhibit the many inherently inconsistent and negative effects of social media communication, promising solutions such as deradicalization and increasing internet participation may utilize the mobilization and connectivity advantages online to address underlying conflicts before it’s too late.

References

Crockett, M.J. (2017). Moral outrage in the digital age. *Nat Hum Behav 1*, 769–771. doi:10.1038/s41562-017-0213-3.

Martin, J., Brickman, P., & Murray, A. (1984). Moral outrage and pragmatism: Explanations for collective action. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 20(5), 484–496. doi:10.1016/0022-1031(84)90039-8.

Workneh, T. W. (2021) Social media, protest, & outrage communication in Ethiopia: toward fractured publics or pluralistic polity?, *Information, Communication & Society*, 24:3, 309-328. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2020.1811367.

Xu, H. (2022) The Role of Moral Outrage in Coordinating Collective Action on Social Media, *Annual Review of Psychology* 70, 69-79. doi:10.1016/1-M4D3-7H15-UP-52Y